

HERCULES OR MEDUSA: HEROES AND VILLAINS
AND THEIR IMPACT ON CONSUMERS'
PREFERENCE FOR VICE AND
VIRTUE PRODUCTS

by

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ABSTRACT

In cultures around the world the morality taught from childhood supports heroes as role models while villains are to be eschewed. Research and folk lore suggest that heroes are looked up to while the villains should be looked down upon. However, across time, we see that villainy has a certain allure to which individuals respond. This research explores the influence of villain versus hero labels on product choice and preference. First we propose that after exposure to a villainous brand compared to a hero brand, consumers become more impulsive in their product choices. Second, we suggest an interactive influence of a villain versus hero label on virtue versus vice products. Intuition would predict that virtue products help people and there should be a greater match with hero (helpful character) label. Similarly the matching theory would predict that a vice product would have more in common with a villain (indulgent character) label. However, we propose, counter to intuition based on matching, that individuals prefer a virtue product with a villain label compared to a virtue product with a hero label. Similarly, they prefer a vice product with a hero label compared to vice product with a villain label. Six studies test our proposed hypotheses and the underlying theory based on justification which we suggest leads to an interactive influence on product choice. This research contributes to the influence of labels on product choices and provides important insight for branding literature where a mismatch rather than match between attributes and labels can increase the value of a product.

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INTRODUCTION

In cultures around the world, the morality taught from childhood supports heroes as role models (Dundes and Dundes 2006; Staats et al. 2009a, 2009b; Taylor and Francis 2009) while villains are to be eschewed. Heroes are the epitome of selfless behavior. A hero puts others' well-being ahead of himself or herself. Individuals are taught the rewards of being a hero and the downfall of being a villain. Through generations stories like Hercules, Medusa and Harry Potter clearly illustrate this. The heroes save the day, conquer the evil villains, and everyone loves them.

Social norms that discuss the benefits of heroic behavior and the pitfalls of villainous behavior are based on the logic that conforming to heroic behavior will help elevate the well-being of the society as a whole. Everyone will be focused on helping others rather than indulging in selfish behavior. Individuals in society see the benefits of following social norms since such compliance or conformity will help them build and maintain relationships with others. For example, children are taught early from stories like Sleeping Beauty and Superman that helping others promises social reward and personal happiness.

Social norms become the moral rules of the group and specify what should be done to remain a member of a group as well as maintain a self-image of being good, kind and helpful (Asch 1955; Berkowitz 1972; Cialdini and Trost 1998; Pepitone 1976; Schaffer 1983; Schwartz 1977). In addition to being motivated to be helpful and to maintain self-image, individuals conform to norms to avoid feelings of shame, guilt and

fear (Aronson 1969; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno 1991; Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Pepitone 1976; Reno et al. 1993; Staats et al. 2009a).

Conformity to such norms is rewarded repeatedly in society (Opp 1982) since helpful individuals are held up to others as examples and heroes. Hence, people conform to such norms even when the consequence for providing this assistance is unpleasant (Latane and Darley 1968; Schwartz 1970). Schwartz (1970) showed that a fairly high percentage (59%) of people are willing to donate their bone marrow to save another, even though they would suffer some pain during the procedure and physical discomfort for several days.

Yet, if heroes are the social norm that people should emulate, why is it that we see instances when people are drawn towards villainous labels? Why is there an allure for villainy? We see instances of such allure being used when products or even experiences are branded with villainous titles or when villainous characters are used as brand ambassadors. On the one hand we see Wheaties spend millions of dollars to display ‘heroes’ on their cereal box fronts, Harry Potter saving the day at Hogwarts and many electronic games engaging players slaying dragons and other villains. On the other hand, we see brands using villainy to draw customers such as Kia car ads exhibiting a ‘bad’ or ‘villainous’ car that hurts cuddly animals or Mercedes Benz focus on “badness.” *Jersey Shore*, *Survivor* and other reality shows earn top ratings from their ‘villains.’ Harley Davidson Motorcycles sell a villainous look and sound and call their customers devils on their website. Professional basketball player LeBron James was touted as an NBA bad boy and is featured in a Nike commercial in which he calls himself a ‘villain.’ Therefore,

it seems that despite being taught to value heroes, villainy has an allure to which individuals respond.

We are interested in examining how hero versus villain labels might affect perception and subsequent consumption. In this research, we first examine the influence that activating a hero versus villain mindset has on ensuing preferences. We do this since there is very little empirical work that has demonstrated how such an activation can influence consumer choices. Specifically, we propose that due to activation of a villain mindset compared to a hero mindset, through either a priming mechanism or naturally in the environment, individuals become more impulsive in their product choices.

Second, if we consider the influence of a hero versus villain labels on choice of virtue or vice products, intuition based on a simple match might predict that people should prefer a virtue product with a hero label since presumably a virtue (e.g., a healthy product like fruit salad) will help us improve our lifestyle by making us more virtuous. A hero also is looked upon as a helpful character and hence there should be a better fit with a virtue product. On the other hand, there should be a better fit or match between a vice product and a villain label since both signify attributes of indulgence. However, counter to intuition, we propose that consumers prefer a vice product with a hero label rather than with a villain label. Similarly they prefer a virtue product with a villain label rather than with a hero label. We utilize work on choice justification to explain why we predict such an interactive influence of labels (hero vs. villain) with product type (virtue vs. vice).

In the next section we present the findings of a preliminary field study that provides insights into the role of a hero versus villain label on subsequent behavior. This field study helps us demonstrate that yes, there is an influence of such labels on impulsive

consumer choice and also helps bridge an empirical gap in literature that has not previously demonstrated such an influence. Subsequently, we review literature in branding and justification research that helps us build our process account for the proposed effect and helps us highlight the implications of our work in the marketplace. We then present studies that test our propositions. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

PRELIMINARY DATA

Halloween provided a unique opportunity to collect preliminary data to see whether villain and hero characters affect behavior. On October 31st, we observed trick or treaters dressed as villains or heroes. Two homes in suburban neighborhoods were used to collect the data. When the trick or treaters arrived at the door, a plastic orange jack-o-lantern bucket containing candy was held out. The children were told that they could take as much candy as they wanted. The candies were all the same approximate size and value. The trick or treaters were tracked by their type of costume and number of candies taken. Examples of hero costumes included a princess, Superman, SWAT member, police, angel, Batman, Luke Skywalker and other similar characters. Villain costumes included a zombie, witch, vampire, mummy, ninja, devil and pirate. There were multiple children dressed as some of the characters. Those that were not clearly identifiable as a villain or hero, such as a football player, monkey, skier, dancer, pumpkin, banana, cheerleader, Tide box and other costumes, were excluded from the study. The final sample size included 84 trick or treaters: 47 heroes and 37 villains. Analysis indicated that the average number of candies taken by heroes was 2.02 compared to $M = 3.41$ for villains. The difference across the two groups was significant at p value $< .00$ ($F(1, 83) = 18.92$). There was a difference of villainous versus heroic roles (in this case costumes) on behavior observed by the number of candies taken.

This preliminary study in a naturalistic environment illustrates that hero and villain costumes served to activate a hero versus villain mindset that influenced

subsequent behavior differently. Children dressed as villains took more candies (a measure of impulsive behavior) compared to children dressed as heroes. In the next section, we review literature that helps us build our process account.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Much of the work on villainous or heroic behavior has been from a pathological point of view assessing the impact of playing violent games (Carnagey and Anderson 2004; Ferguson 2007; Hartmann and Vorderer 2010), watching violent acts on the television (Calvert et al. 2004; Locke 1974, Singer 1986) and culture on the creation of angry villainous individuals (Bushman and Whitaker 2010; Sherry 2001). Despite the significant psychological literature that aims to reduce destructive pathological behavior, scant research has considered the increased popularity of villainous games, characters and brands for the immediate impact they have on consumption decisions. Our preliminary field study suggests that exposure to villainous labels has the ability to lead an individual to behave more impulsively compared to a heroic label (operationalized through costume worn). Before we explore further the specific influence of a hero or villain label by product type (virtue or vice), it is worth considering the relevant literature on branding and the insights it offers in developing our conceptualization.

Branding

Marketers argue that a brand name is the most important element of a product. A brand name becomes the centerpiece of marketing programs and brand equity, enhancing awareness and purchase. A brand's value can be tied to its ability to reduce a consumer's uncertainty about product performance and create a favorable image for the product. Specifically, branding may be used to reduce uncertainty, reinforce an important attribute

or benefit and provide a congruent and positive meaning for the product. For instance, brand managers realize that a carefully chosen name can bring inherent strength to a brand. A study of 101 firms found that 60% of respondents felt that brand name alone, without advertising support, will influence the sale of a product (Kohli and LaBahn 1997). The choice of the brand name is considered significantly more important than packaging and incentives for product purchase and is part of a competitive strategy (Aaker 1995; Keller 1993; Keller et al. 1998; Keller and Lehmann 2006). To that end many companies commit a substantial amount of resources and research to brand name selection (Bao et al. 2008; Keller 1993; Kohli and LaBahn 1997; Petty 2008a, 2008b).

Because it is difficult for consumers to find specific product information before purchase, they look to other sources, including the brand, for information. Brand names help identify a product, suggest the nature of a product and its positioning, and more importantly take on their own meaning and presence because they represent the product (Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Kohli and LaBahn 1997).

Because of the impact of brand names, many are descriptive. For example, Mop'n Glow floor cleaner and DieHard auto batteries signal their use and benefits (Petty 2008b). Alphanumeric brands play a role in determining customer perceptions of technological products as the numbers provide information about the newness and letters help identify the product type, which affects choice and shifts preference (Gunasti and Ross 2010). Associating the brand to a spokesperson can lead to growth or decline. A spokesperson who is seen as good helps a product sell while a spokesperson who appears bad reduces the sale of a product. For example, Salton Inc. was a designer and seller of kitchen products, including grills. For 5 years the grill failed to draw attention. Within 2

years of branding with George Foreman, Salton sold more than 10 million grills (Royal 2000). In contrast, branding with Martha Stewart, who provided a wholesome homemaker image, proved a problem when she was sent to prison for insider trading and her daughter published a scathing ‘mommy dearest’ book about her. In the case of each spokesperson, the character associated with the brand became part of the product. When the spokesperson was desirable, so was the product.

Even the sound of a brand name can affect preference. Whether the tongue is positioned in the front or back of the mouth as a person speaks the product name affects the perceived fit of the product with the brand and consumer preference. People prefer particular brand names when the vowel sound of the word is congruent with the product. Positive versus negative sounds of words also effect preference (Lowrey and Shrum 2007a, 2007b). A brand name with a positive connotation contributes to brand preference because of the distinct positive images associated with the product (Boa et al. 2008; Keller and Lehmann 2006).

Considering this research, if positive images and congruency are important in branding, are products hurt by the use of a villain name? Do consumers prefer a hero or villain name product? What is the impact of heroes and villains in branding? Heroes and villains are at opposite ends of the good-bad continuum. It may be expected that individuals face a conflict between an interest in villains and esteem for heroes. They can ignore social norms and find villains alluring or they can forgo an interest in villains and seek heroes. Both decisions have inherent tradeoffs – namely the former leads to guilt and the latter leads to giving up something ‘spicy,’ which tends to be painful. Therefore, we next consider research on choice justification, which has shown that at times

individuals utilize certain reasons to justify their choices and hence feel good about their decisions. Justification may provide the compromise an individual desires to choose something counter to social norms or enhance the appeal of a virtuous, but unappetizing, product.

Choice Justification

If there is an allure to villainy, yet if individuals desire conformity we may expect to see consumers justify their choices. Think of going to a fast food restaurant and being able to choose between a chocolate malt and vegetable pack. When an individual faces conflict in choosing between an indulgent versus healthful good, two extreme outcomes are possible. For example, a vice food (chocolate malt), unlike a virtue food (vegetable pack) presents a conflict between immediate consumption pleasure and long term detrimental effects to a person's health. The person can ignore the long term consequences, consume the vice food and feel immediate pleasure, or the person can give up the vice food in favor of long term health benefits. This is consistent with the conflict between immediate gratification and long term consequences seen in impulsive decision making (Metcalf and Mischel 1999; Mishra and Mishra 2011).

There are tradeoffs between vice or impulsive choices that lead to postconsumption guilt and the virtue or healthful choices that involve giving up an immediate pleasure. People prefer adopting a compromise rather than adopting one of the two extreme approaches. They want to indulge in the immediate pleasure but desire reasons to reduce guilt experienced from indulgence. Guilt reduction is accomplished through justifying their purchase to themselves and others (Mishra and Mishra 2011; Okada 2005; Sharfir et al. 1993). People can be expected to justify their vice purchase by

telling themselves that their purchase has some virtuous value and will not be harmful. When people can justify reasons for their choice they are able to mitigate guilt.

Studies have found individuals who reduced guilt through justification preferred a luxury to a necessity item (Kivetz and Simonson 2002), a hedonic choice when it was bundled with a charitable donation (Strahilevitz and Meyers 1998), and a vice food when it was justified with a price discount (Mishra and Mishra 2011). When justifying their choices, the individuals in these studies did not feel guilt. Thus, justification provides a reduction of guilt and reason to make a choice that might otherwise have been seen as hedonic or indulgent. This may provide understanding for choices that appear contrary to what congruence or matching process might suggest. Thus instead of adopting one of two extreme approaches, people may adopt a compromise approach. Justification provides an opportunity for compromise. Utilizing the research on branding and justification effects, we next present our theoretical rationale for our hypothesized effects.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

Our preliminary study suggests that a hero will prime individuals to make choices that reflect what is expected and helpful and that thoughts of a villain will lead to choices that focus on the self and are indulgent. Although prior research in social norms suggests individuals may shun the offensive image - villainy - and be more aware of exhibiting behavior that conforms to social norms, we see confirmation in the preliminary experiment, that individuals display more impulsive behavior when a villain mindset has been made salient. We examine this further in a controlled lab study and see whether making a hero versus villain character more salient influences impulsive choice. We next focus on the second proposition of this research, which is to consider the interactive influence of a hero versus villain label on the preference of vice versus virtue product.

When we consider virtue versus vice products as mentioned in literature, vice products are described as products that are considered indulgent and hence can result in guilt post purchase/consumption (e.g., a chocolate cake) and describes a virtue product as one that can be consumed or bought without the possibility of postpurchase guilt (Mishra and Mishra 2011; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999; Wertenbroch 1998).¹ When we consider virtue versus vice products by attaching a villain versus hero label to them, two different predictions can be made. The first prediction based on simple matching appears intuitive. When individuals are exposed to villain brand names, the mindset of a villain is activated,

¹ We also conducted a pretest to ensure that the products used in the experiments were considered vice and virtue products. Products considered vice were thought to be more indulgent and guilt-inducing than virtue products.

which is strongly associated with a character who thinks of the self and is indulgent. Hence, one might start considering the product also to have some of those indulgent attributes. If a villain label is given to a vice product then a simple match would predict that this congruency of information may result in greater valuation of the vice product. Similarly, when a product has a hero label, a hero mindset is activated which is associated with being good and helpful. With this in mind, the individual may expect the product will be helpful and good for them. Therefore, a hero label would match better with a virtue product and should enhance preference.

However, a second prediction can be made based on research in choice justification. Justification research suggests that consumers are attracted towards vice products because they find them indulgent. However, they do realize that they might feel postconsumption guilt because of this same indulgent nature of the product. Hence, it makes it easier for them to buy the product if a justification or reason for purchase is provided. On the other hand, virtue products, e.g., a healthy food product, might be good for the consumers but it does not have the quality of indulgence or desirability attached to it. In such a situation if the product can be made more desirable consumers' preference can be increased. In sum, justification research would suggest that consumers are more likely to prefer a vice food with a hero label rather than a villain label. However, they prefer a virtue food with a villain label rather than a hero label. We suggest that when consumers are faced with a vice product, they understand that it has short term benefits (indulgence) but long term harms (adverse health effects if it is a vice food). Faced with such a situation they look for reasons that can help them justify their consumption. In this instance of choice conflict a hero label appears to add positive, helpful attributes to the

vice product. It is difficult to think of a hero harming them. However, a villain label adds greater indulgence and appears more harmful. Hence, consumers prefer a vice product with a hero label over a villain label. On the other hand, when one sees a virtue product, although it has long term benefits, many times it may not appear very attractive or desirable. In such a situation a villain label spices up the product and adds a more indulgent aspect to it. Therefore, consumers prefer a virtue product with a villain label rather than a hero label.

We test our proposed effect and the underlying theory across five experiments designed to examine the role of villain and hero label on behavior, product choice and evaluation. Namely experiment 1 evaluates the impact of hero and villain thoughts on helpful behavior and consumer impulsivity. The impact of hero and villain labels on vice and virtue products is measured in experiments 2 and 3. Lastly, in experiments 4 and 5 we present process evidence for the proposed underlying theory.

EXPERIMENTS

Experiment 1: Influence of Hero Versus Villain Prime on Impulsive Choice

Experiment 1 had two objectives. The first objective was to address possible limitations of the preliminary study. It could be argued that although the naturalistic setting of the preliminary study demonstrates the clear implications of this work in the real world, it has fewer controls. Hence we conducted these experiments in the lab to examine whether we could replicate the results of the preliminary study in a more controlled setting. For this experiment we adopted the process of eliciting thoughts about a villain or hero because thought about a topic or object is known to engage representations that can then lead to mind-sets (Bargh, Chen and Burrows 1996).

The second objective was to examine the influence of hero versus villain thoughts on consumers' product choice, specifically impulsive choice. Literature has found that the choice between a virtue (fruit) and vice (chocolate) snack is a measure of impulsivity (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999). If thoughts about villains increase desire for immediate personal reward, we expect that a person will prefer to purchase a clothing item they want now, even if it is more expensive than expected rather than delaying gratification by shopping further. If an individual desires to maintain a positive self-concept of financial responsibility and avoid feelings of regret it can be expected a consumer will put off immediate gratification of an expensive purchase. Impulsivity was measured by the desire for immediate versus delayed gratification and the choice of a virtue versus a vice snack.

Method

Two hundred and thirty-five participants took part in the experiment to earn partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between subjects conditions. Participants in the hero condition were asked to bring to mind a hero and to list 4 of the hero's characteristics. Participants in the villain condition listed 4 characteristics of the villain they brought to mind.

A manipulation check was provided to determine if the participant was in a hero or villain mind-set by measuring their willingness to help and rescue another.

Manipulation check analysis of those randomly assigned the hero or villain condition revealed significant differences after priming across these two groups. The first scenario read: "You are walking across campus from one class to another. You are with a group of 10 other students also on their way to the same exam. You see a person coming the other direction stumble and fall down the concrete stairs. He is holding his knee, which appears injured and his belongings are strewn down the steps. You look around to see if anyone stops but no one does and they all keep walking. How likely are you to stop and help the person?" On a 0 – 10 scale there was significant difference with $M_{\text{villain}} = 7.45$ versus $M_{\text{hero}} = 8.49$, $F(1, 234) = 9.27$, $p = .00$. In a second scenario to measure the likelihood of coming to the aid or rescue of another there was also significant difference between those in the villain and those in the hero condition. The difference across these groups in the second manipulation checks were $M_{\text{villain}} = 4.39$ vs. $M_{\text{hero}} = 5.26$, $F(1, 234) = 4.17$, $p = .04$. These responses indicate that participants in the hero condition were significantly more likely to go to the rescue of another than those in the villain condition. This illustrates that thinking about a villain or hero effects behavior.

Next we evaluated how thoughts of heroes and villains impact consumer choice. Participants were given the scenario that they had gone shopping and found a pair of jeans they liked but cost twice what they would normally spend. They were then asked if they would buy them now or wait and continue shopping. In the second scenario, participants were asked if they prefer a chocolate or fruit snack. This experiment employed a simple two factor cell design (mind-set: hero versus villain) between-subjects design. The dependent measure was impulsivity operationalized by choosing when to buy the jeans (now or wait) or the type of snack (vice or virtue).

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed 29.9% of the participants in the villain condition were likely to purchase the jeans now compared to 18.5% of those in the hero condition ($\chi^2(1,235) = 4.21, p = .04$). This indicates that participants who saw the villain label became more impulsive than those who saw the hero label.

The next task, which involved choosing between a virtue fruit snack and a vice chocolate snack, also resulted in a significant difference. The results indicated that 41% of the participants in the villain condition were likely to choose a chocolate snack compared to 28% of those in the hero condition ($\chi^2(1,235) = 4.63, p = .03$).

In summary we see these results are consistent with our proposed account that suggests that thoughts of heroes and villains impact behavior. Experiment 1 illustrates that after thinking of a hero, individuals are more likely to be unselfish by coming to the rescue of another and make less impulsive choices. Conversely, those exposed to a villain label were less likely to come to the aid of another and were more impulsive in

their choice. In the subsequent experiments we examine the interactive influence of hero versus villain labels on virtue and vice foods.

Experiment 2: Valuation

The main objective of this experiment was to examine whether a vice product will be preferred more with a villain label (as matching theory would predict) or a hero label (as choice justification would predict).

Method

Two hundred ninety-nine participants took part in this experiment for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the following four between participants conditions 2 (description: hero versus villain) x 2 (product: virtue versus vice). Participants were shown an image of bottled water (virtue product) with either a hero or villain description or an ice-cream bar (vice product) with either a hero or villain description. Descriptions were taken from participants' input in experiment 1 where they were asked to describe characteristics of a hero or villain. Subsequently, participants were asked how much they would be willing to pay for the product that they had seen. Therefore, willingness to pay was the dependent variable of interest in this experiment.

Results and Discussion

An ANOVA revealed that for the virtue product (bottled water), participants were willing to pay more when it was offered with a villain label ($M = \$1.26$) compared to when it was offered with a hero label ($M = \$1.10$), ($F(1,298) = 4.98, p = .026$). However, for the vice product (ice cream), participants were willing to pay more when it was

offered with a hero label ($M = \$1.00$) compared to when it was offered with a villain label ($M = \$0.82$), ($F(1,298) 8.21, p = .005$). Figure #1 graphs the results.

Therefore, the results of experiment 2 support the pattern of results predicted by choice justification and not that by matching theory. The next experiment will control for type of product and determine the influence of villain versus hero label on preferences.

Experiment 3: Valuation with Same Product

The primary aim of the experiment was to control for the product type. In experiment 2, two different products, vice (ice cream) and virtue (spring water), were utilized, so to test the effects of hero and villain label more rigorously we use the same product but describe it as either tasty (vice) or healthy (virtue).

Method

Two hundred and forty-nine participants took part in experiment 3 for partial course credit. The procedure followed was largely similar to experiment 2. The

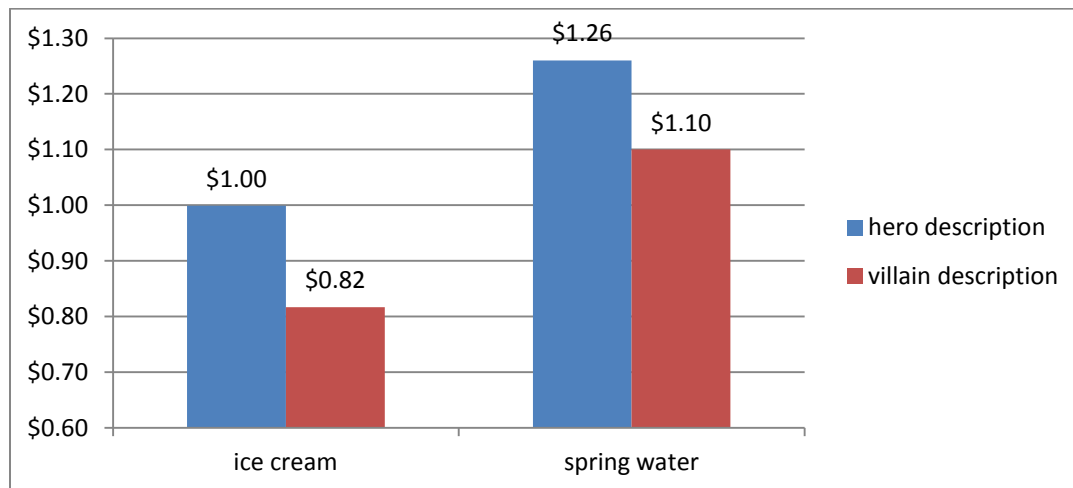


Figure 1 WTP ice cream and spring water

participants were randomly assigned one of the following four between participants conditions 2 (label: hero versus villain) x 2 (product: virtue versus vice). Participants were taken to a room where a platter of cookies described as healthy or tasty with a hero or villain label were displayed. Pumpkin chocolate chip cookies were utilized because they can be seen as either virtue or vice. Participants were asked to take as many cookies as they wanted to provide an evaluation of the product. After consumption, participants were asked how much they would be willing to pay for a 4 pack of the cookies. Willingness to pay was the dependent variable in this experiment.

Results and Discussion

We subjected willingness to pay to analysis of variance. The analysis revealed a significant interaction between label (hero versus villain) x product (virtue versus vice) ($F(1,248) = 13.48, p=.00$). Participants who saw the virtue cookies were willing to pay significantly more when they had the villain label ($M = \$1.31$) compared to when they had a hero label ($M = \$0.969$) ($F(1,118) = 15.04, p=.00$). Figure #2 graphs the results.

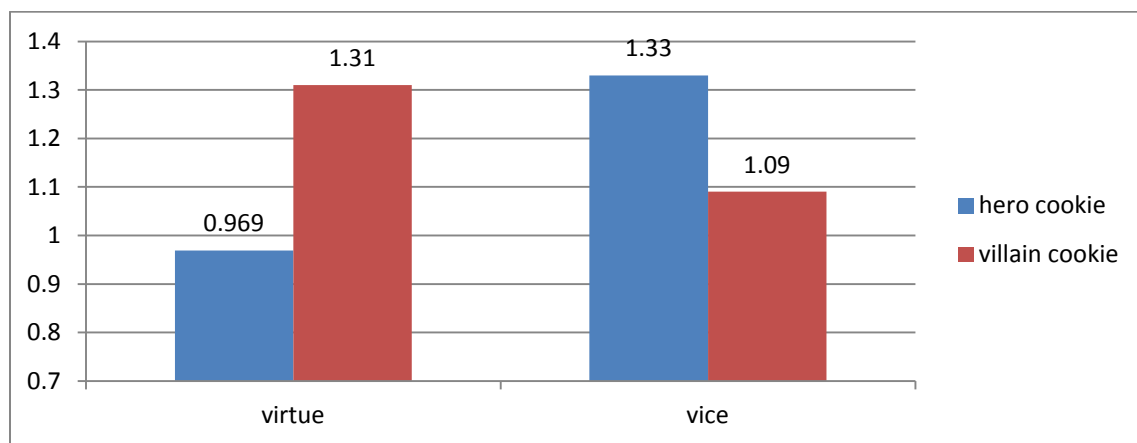


Figure 2 WTP vice hero > WTP vice villain pumpkin chocolate chip cookie

However for the vice cookies, participants were willing to pay more when the cookies had the hero label ($M = \$1.33$) than when it they were offered with the villain label (label ($M = \$1.09$) ($F(1,129) = 3.43, p=.06$). Thus we see in Experiment 3 that while controlling for the product, we find the same pattern of results as in experiment 2. This suggests consumer choice with justification rather than matching theory. In subsequent experiments we will test the underlying process of justification.

Experiment 4: Justification Reasons

The aim of this experiment was to test our proposed theoretical account which suggests that consumers might use the reasons provided by the hero and villain labels as a means to justify the purchase of vice versus virtue products. In this study we utilize food products that are considered virtue or vice. A hero label reduces the perception that a vice food can do harm while a villain label can make a healthy food (generally considered less tasty) appear more attractive/indulgent.

Past research has suggested that if decisions are not backed up by reasons they are especially likely to produce regret; conversely reasons for a choice can inoculate the decision maker against regret (Ritov and Baron 1992; Inman and Zeelenberg 2002). Research has also found that individuals will provide a greater number of reasons for the decision when they feel the need to justify their choice (Inman and Zeelenberg 2002; Dahlstrand and Montgomery 1989). Therefore in this study, instead of asking participants their choice or preference we asked them to generate the reasons why they might choose the product. The number of reasons generated show whether individuals are trying to justify their choice or not. Greater number of reasons would demonstrate that people have to come up with more reasons to justify the choice of the product. This

would be especially true for vice products where consumers are likely to generate reasons to reduce anticipated consumption guilt. However, fewer reasons demonstrates that the choice of the product is reason itself – more true for virtue foods which are considered good for one's health.

Method

One hundred eighty-five participants took part in this experiment for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four between participants conditions 2 (label: hero versus villain) x 2 (product type: tasty food (vice product) versus healthy food (virtue product)).

Participants in the hero condition were shown the picture of a bottled spring water and fruit (virtue foods) or ice cream bar and frosted donuts with sprinkles (vice foods) with a hero label. On the other hand, participants in the villain condition were shown the same set of foods but with a villain label. Hence, each participant saw two sets of food products. For example, participants in the virtue-hero condition would see, “spring water that is said to have superhero qualities.” They were asked “Imagine you are contemplating purchasing the following product. As you contemplate your decision, please list below the reasons why you might decide to purchase this product.”

After seeing the first healthy product (fruit or spring water) with a hero label and providing their reasons for purchase, the participant saw a second healthy product with the hero description and again wrote down reasons they might decide to purchase the product. The same methodology was used for the vice foods. The number of reasons given served as the dependent variable in this experiment.

Results and Discussion

A repeated measures ANOVA was used and a significant product type x label interaction emerged ($F(1, 259) = 11.35, p = .001$). Moreover, since the two products used (e.g., water and fruits) for each product category type (e.g., virtue) did not interact with product type x label, for ease of exposition we collapsed across the two products and used the means of reasons for the subsequent analysis. Decomposing across the hero label we find that participants generated more reasons for the vice product ($M = 4.15$) than for the virtue product ($M = 3.62$), $F(1, 259) = 4.21, p = .04$. However, for the villain label they generated more reasons for the virtue product ($M = 3.95$) than for the vice product ($M = 3.25$), $F(1, 259) = 7.39, p = .007$. A similar pattern of results emerged when utilizing a Poisson regression and considering the data as count data. Figure #3 graphs the result.

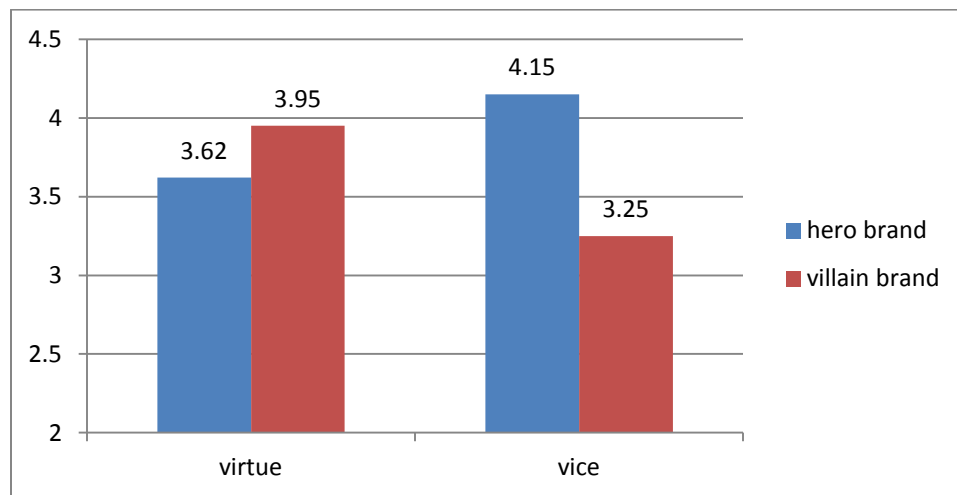


Figure 3 Justification based on number of reasons provided for choice

For the sake of argument, one could state that more reasons should have been generated for the vice food with the villain label since people would find that the most appetizing.

We addressed this concern in two ways. First, we conducted the next experiment which manipulates justification rather than measuring the number of reasons to further test the proposed theoretical mechanism. Second, one needs to consider what is the end goal of any product evaluation situation – it is the final buy/no buy decision. It is possible that although the vice food appears attractive, the moment one sees it anticipated guilt is induced when consumers think of the regret and counterfactuals that might be generated postconsumption. In such a situation if the vice food has a villain label the aspect of indulgence is further enhanced. This might just make it clear to the consumers the greater level of guilt that they may experience postconsumption. Hence, they might find it difficult to generate many reasons for purchase. However, a helpful, hero label in such a situation can provide reasons to reduce postconsumption guilt and can be used to justify purchase. Since, it seems likely that they can justify the purchase of vice food with a hero label they might be motivated to generate more reasons to feel good about their choice. That is the reason why we see fewer reasons generated for a vice food with a villain label compared to a hero label.

In the next study we manipulate the context that can result in reducing the need to justify one's choice.

Experiment 5: Decision by Self Versus Friend

The main aim of the study was to further test the proposed theoretical process that justification effects underlie the proposed effect. Hence, we utilized a commonly used

justification technique, whether the participants themselves make the decision or a friend is deciding for them. The rationale for this manipulation is that when the responsibility of the decision shifts away from the consumer to a friend, what they hope their friend decides indicates their decision without the need for justification (Okada 2005). That is, when one decides for the self, one needs to generate reasons to justify the choice to the self and/or others. However, if the onus of the decision shifts to another then one does not need to justify the decision – one can always put the responsibility on the other. In this experiment we utilized another dependent measure, satisfaction with the product, to demonstrate generalizability.

We expected that the manipulation of whether the participant decides for herself or a friend decides for her would moderate the proposed effect. Specifically, we predicted that when the onus of justification is not on the self the effect would reduce in magnitude –the proposed effect should emerge in the control condition (self decision) but not in the experimental condition (other decision).

Method

Two hundred eighty-four participants took part in this experiment for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned one of eight between-participants conditions 2 (product type: healthy versus tasty) x 2 (brand: hero versus villain) x 2 (choice by: self versus by friend). Participants were brought into the room one at a time and shown a platter of pumpkin chocolate chip cookies with a hero or villain label. Therefore, we controlled for type of product being used by showing them the same cookie. Only the description of the cookie was manipulated as either “tasty” or “healthy.” A table topper stating “healthy cookie” or “tasty cookie” achieved this end. The

participants were then asked “How satisfying will it be to get this cookie for yourself?” or “How satisfying will it be to get this cookie from a friend?” Satisfaction was the dependent variable of interest in this experiment.

Results and Discussion

We subjected the dependent variable of satisfaction to get the product to product type (virtue/vice) x label (hero/villain) x choice (self/friend) to analysis of variance. The analysis revealed a significant three way interaction ($F(1,284) = 23.13, p < .00$). We further analyzed them for the control (decision by self) and experimental condition (decision by friend).

A different pattern of results emerged for the control and experimental condition. In the control condition a significant label x product type interaction emerged, $F(1,141) = 10.1, p = .002$. Consistent with the proposed effect, in the control condition, participants displayed a higher level of satisfaction with a virtue (healthy) cookie given a villain label ($M = 6.74$) compared to when it was offered with a hero label ($M = 5.2$) $F(1,75) = 7.38, p = .008$. Similarly, participants rated satisfaction higher when a vice (tasty) cookie was offered with a hero label ($M = 6.53$) than when it had a villain label ($M = 5.44$), $F(1,65) = 3.31, p = .073$. Despite the pattern being different from the control condition, a significant label x product type interaction emerged in the experimental condition too, $F(1,142) = 13.09, p = .001$. The different pattern emerges in the experimental condition because when a friend is deciding for the participant, the virtue cookie with a hero label is rated as more satisfying ($M = 6.68$) than when it was given a villain label ($M = 4.97$), $F(1,78) = 9.95, p = .002$. Similarly the vice cookie provided with a villain label is

expected to be more satisfying ($M = 6.48$) compared to when it is offered with a hero label ($M = 5.26$), $F(1,63)=4.09$, $p = .047$. Figure #4 graphs the results.

The control condition replicated the results of the previous experiments and demonstrates the interactive influence of product type (virtue/vice) by label (hero/villain). However, the moderation obtained in the experimental condition provides support for the proposed theory that when the onus of justifying shifts to a friend the proposed effect diminishes (or even reverses as we find) in magnitude.

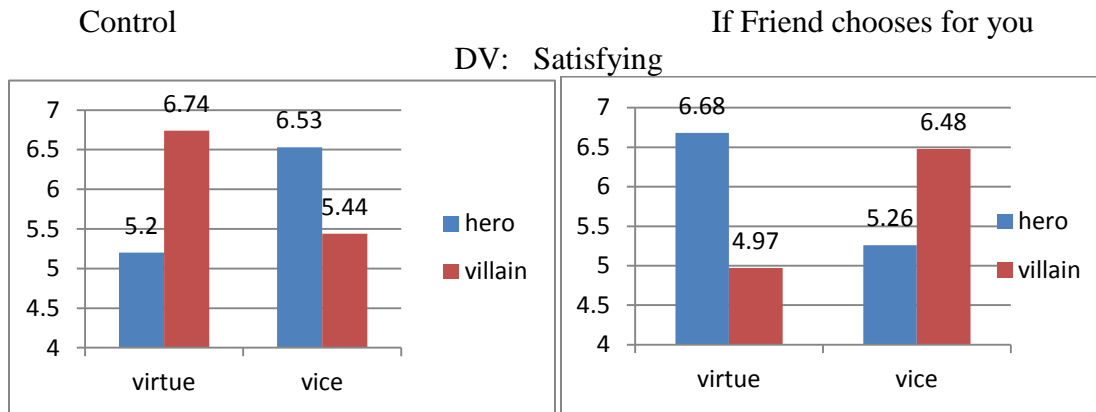


Figure 4 Justification by difference in satisfaction if choice is made for themselves or by a friend.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research demonstrates that both hero and villain labels impact product choice and evaluation. First, a villain label is not always bad for a product. Second, contrary to intuition and matching theory, consumers do not always prefer congruency between a label and product. Specifically we found that thoughts of heroes and villains lead to more or less impulsive behavior. A hero label leads to behavior that is less impulsive and supports delayed gratification while a villain label results in more impulsive behavior and immediate gratification (experiment 1). It was observed that hero and villain labels can alter a consumer's willingness to pay for a product. We tested the effect of combining virtuous and vice items with hero and villain labels and found consumers are willing to pay more for a mismatched vice food with a hero label as compared to a villain label. They are also willing to pay more for a mismatched virtue good with a villain label compared to a hero label (experiments 2 and 3). Experiments 4 and 5 investigated the underlying process and found that justification moderates the hero/villain label effect.

Contrary to what social norms and branding literature suggest, consumers appear attracted to villainy and are willing to pay for it under different conditions.

IMPLICATIONS

This work has theoretical, managerial and consumer implications. First, our theoretical account merges branding and social norms for consumers in ways not expected. Theory on social norms is extended to illustrate that individuals are drawn to villainy. When exposed to a villain label, individuals demonstrate villainous characteristics in a nonpathological way by being less helpful to others, more impulsive in choices and desiring something villainous. Further, unlike branding literature that suggests a label should be a congruent representation of the product, when it comes to heroes and villains, individuals place greater value on a label that is counter to the product attributes. Prior marketing practice has matched virtue foods with hero labels, yet we saw greater product valuation when there was a mismatch.

Managerially, with the prevalence of hero and villain labels used in product marketing, consumer judgment and choice may be affected in ways not previously perceived. Marketers may want to alter their strategy from matching hero labels with virtue goods to mismatching a villain label with virtue goods to increase consumer consumption.

For consumers these results suggest individuals should keep heroic images around when making choices, but not when they are provided a choice of a hero label with a vice product. In this situation, they are likely to choose the more indulgent product because they feel justified in doing so in the presence of a hero label.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research is limited in its concentration on vice and virtuous products in relation to hero and villain branding. Future studies can address issues related to villainy and what other ways villain labels affect individuals. For example, will a villain label evoke greater effort and risk-taking than heroic images and labels?

In summary, this research may further extend the perceived impact of brand literature by providing insight into a desire for nonconformity and villainy and the positive impact on some consumer choice.

Garth Brooks, a musician known for his down home country charm said “I'd love to play a villain in a movie, the kind of bad guy you would never think of me being able to play. Like most people, I have a darker side I'd like to explore.” It appears consumers have an attraction to the darker side, as well, and it impacts their behavior, evaluation and choices.

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